



The Grumblee

By Peter Fox

An essential 'back-channel' for remote workers to use in order not to clog the main mission-centred communications channel. (This is about unhappiness, another back-channel, *Moots*, is provided for mission-related discussion.)

The unhappy communications channel

Everyone can find something to be grumpy about. In a physical organisation this is dealt with by low-threat body-language, and informal grumbling round the water cooler which doesn't interfere with the mission-related communications. When unhappy people get home they complain to their partners or people in the pub to 'get it off their chest'. 'Unhappy' is an emotional response. Some people need to talk things through with friends to express feelings in practical terms. The reaction of other people helps put the matter into perspective or may give a boost to a person's feeling of being a downtrodden martyr.

At the very least being able to talk about what's making you unhappy makes it bearable.

Question: What happens if there are no opportunities for showing unhappiness where your preferences and ego is important? What happens if there is nobody to 'get advice from'? Answer: Bad things.

Remote working blues

When working remotely we have exactly the situation just described. There is no opportunity to pout, sarcasm is lost, dissatisfaction through body language is lost. Important low-key signals that we take for granted in a physical situation go missing. The alternative is much more blunt, and therefore abrasive, communications.

If there is only one communications channel, the main mission-focussed one, then either 'unhappy' is allowed to fester or it poisons the main channel. Oh dear! Whilst the team is discussing how to progress some hectic job you don't want to be sidetracked by an individual's moans or group disquiet coming out of left-field.

The Grumblee

For the reasons given above we need an 'unhappy' channel and if we lose the traditional methods when working remotely then we need to create an alternative. For this reason I've invented a real person called the Grumblee who has the job of

- being available to listen to grumbles,
- possibly sympathise with them, and
- if necessary initiate corrective actions required by the organisation.

I don't have to give examples of the myriad of grumbles and complaints that are applicable, but it is worth emphasising that

- the scope of subject of complaint can be very broad
- the 'responsible levels' in the organisation can be from the top to the bottom
- the Grumblee needs to know the immediate context and wider context

The fact that unhappiness exists is what matters. Clearly 'who is at fault' is likely to depend on who you listen to and there may be a significant hidden back-story. Annoyances may be worked-around or attitudes softened or poor working practices addressed.

As we saw above we don't really want things to have to get to the 'writing a letter of complaint' stage so the Grumblee has to be extremely easy to talk to - both physically and conversationally. They need to be trusted and seen to have some influence. (I have worked in physical organisations where the MD's PA has filled this role. This was particularly important in times of change where she was able to reassure people that things would get sorted out in due course.)

Clearly the Grumblee is a very important person who

- needs tip-top diplomatic skills,
- is good at listening (and getting people to articulate their problems)
- is able to look at issues dispassionately
- is able to sympathise without promising specific actions
- is trusted throughout the hierarchy and 'independent'
- has the experience and knowledge of the people involved in order to 'have quiet words' or suggest things without causing major upsets
- is able to recommend remedial actions to management

Also they need to be able to distinguish between mission-related issues and general unhappiness. For example "Nobody listens to me" is different to "It won't work because..." (The latter would be dealt with by a Moot.)

Discussion

Just because the Grumblee is always dealing with problems doesn't mean they should be seen as a 'moaning minnie' themselves. In fact the opposite is required: The Grumblee must be the most committed to the organisation's mission, maintaining a stable, healthy organisation and a positive workforce.

Could this role be given to an outsider in the name of 'complete independence'? Absolutely not for the reasons just given. There is nobody who is more of a 'company person' than the Grumblee. Their executive role would be extremely limited. They would need to take advice and be kept properly informed by top management.

Often management suffers from poor communication skills. When the superlative communicator, the Grumblee, is on hand there are problems when the Grumblee is used to pass on information that should be going via standard command and control channels.

- The management get lazy and rely on information trickling down unofficially. Amongst other things this makes the Grumblee appear as the *only* person who knows what's going on. (Actually they will almost certainly be able to 'see the wood for the trees')
- The Grumblee may pass on necessary information when management can't see the need or don't have the skills to do so which makes them feel very

put out.

There is a way round this disastrous mis-match of communications skills problem (It *will* end in tears.) and that is to merge the role of Grumblee with official communicator. It is easy to imagine a newsletter editor who's job it is to roam on the lookout for things to communicate gaining people's confidence.

Finally, while unhappiness is best removed from the daily mission sessions, every opportunity for praise, acknowledgement, appreciation and group satisfaction should be taken in the public mainstream.

Exercises

- 1 Why is it best to praise in public and moan in private?
- 2 Can any Grumblee-ing be done by line manager?
- 3 What factors would adversely affect the ability of the Grumblee to operate
 - a External to them
 - b Their own skills
- 4 If 'a stitch in time saves nine' how should a physical organisation buff-up its 'listening' abilities?
- 5 ... Or is it 'healthy socialising' for people to have something to moan about amongst themselves?
- 6 Discuss: Managers get very upset with better communicators because...
- 7 Practical - You may want to try role-playing: Create 'tips and traps' advice for Grumblees when dealing with an unhappy person.
- 8 [See *Champions and directors* in this series]
How would the people-skills required of a production manager (director) differ between:
 - a traditional physical organisation
 - b remote working network without a Grumblee
 - c remote working network with a Grumblee

More information: vulpeculox.net/treems

Other subjects in this series :

- Champions and chiefs
- Left-Right-Centre
- Moots

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Peter Fox is the sole originator of Treems and associated concepts as described in this series. He lives in Essex, England is pleased to correspond with people working in the same field.